

Choosing Better Schools

Magnets, Charters, Vouchers and Proactive Parent Involvement

How do we improve public schools, particularly chronically low performing schools, so they can accelerate improvement in student achievement? This is the central question facing education professionals, reformers, and parent advocates today, and there are a wide variety of "answers" floating around national, state, and local conversations.

In recent months, school choice is one such answer receiving considerable attention. This term refers to a variety of reform ideas, (See "School Choice Glossary" below). The thinking, say proponents, is that giving parents more options about where they can send their children to school will pressure public school systems to change and improve. By creating more of a "free market" for education, they argue, public schools will have to serve children better or be pushed out by more effective competitors—just like in the larger free market economy.

This idea of a free market in the context of public education is not new, but it is unquestionably hot. Many chapters are already confronting a variety of school choice options. This issue of *Parent Press*, therefore, will provide questions and tips that can help parents and chapters make sense of local realities. For those not yet confronting school choice proposals or plans, we'll try to make sense of the national conversation around this topic and emphasize the "choice" all parents can make to work to improve the schools their children are already in.

Promises and Pitfalls

Today, parents and districts must often address school choice in several forms. There are public **magnet schools** or **controlled-choice programs** that have been part of several districts' attempts to resolve court desegregation orders for more than two decades. There is the growing **charter school** movement, supported by both President Clinton and Congress to the tune of more than \$100 million annually. There is the increasing popularity and use of **vouchers** that allow parents to use public money to send their children to private and sometimes religious schools. And although a percentage of parents with means have always been able to choose private or parochial options, there is a rising number of parents opting out of schools completely and **homeschooling** their children.

On the face of it, the notion of giving parents more control over their children's education sounds like a good idea, in line with Par-

ents for Public Schools' belief in a more proactive role for parents in public education.

Actually, school choice proposals pose a variety of serious challenges to parents seeking to improve public schools for all children. PPS has stated its opposition to voucher programs (See page 3), but does not have official positions on home schooling, charters and other varieties of public school choice.

Choice programs represent innovative solutions in some places and a threatening first step to dismantling public school systems in others. "If you're talking about fixing public schools, choice options may sound promising, but too often they represent piecemeal, child-by-child approaches," says Kelly Butler, PPS Executive Director. "If you work to fix a public school system, everybody benefits."

Choice Inside Public Systems

From PPS's perspective, the least controversial school choice policies are those that allow parents to select schools either within their own school district or to attend any public school in their state. Varying degrees of district-wide choice are offered in numerous places around the country, including large urban centers such as New York, Seattle, and Minneapolis. Fourteen states allow state-wide choice.

These ideas have a number of advantages. First, new alternative or magnet schools (see Glossary) allow parents to match children's interests with special programs. Often, these magnet schools help to promote integration across racial and class lines. In some PPS districts, they have provided parents a greater range of appealing educational options, built a more involved parent constituency, and even helped to slow the number of public school parents seeking private schools.

They may also attract additional resources. In some places, for example, magnet programs focused on science or technology, have attracted corporate sponsors who provide financial support as well as loan staff to expand the school's educational offerings. In other schools, a magnet's thematic orientation creates a rallying point for the educators, parents and the sur-

rounding community that unleashes needed excitement and energy for higher student achievement.

A related approach, "controlled-choice" programs, used most notably in Boston, Indianapolis, and Nashville, allow parents to choose to send their children to any of a district's schools, as long as racial balance is maintained. Like magnet initiatives, these "controlled

choice" options keep public dollars within public school systems.

Still, there are limitations. Transporta-

tion problems can prevent some, particularly low-income children from taking advantage of all the opportunities offered. Magnet and alternative programs tend to attract active parents from community schools, robbing these—often struggling—schools of the human resources they need to change and improve. And some controlled-choice programs have been criticized for preventing children from attending schools closest to their homes. Others have been challenged in court by white and Asian parents who contend that these plans reverse discriminate, preventing their children from attending the schools of their choice because of their race.

These shortcomings point back to PPS's core belief that the best choice is proactive parent involvement focused on existing public school systems (See *School Choices: How Do They Measure Up?*). All parents everywhere should have the right to choose to participate in a school or district's governance, decision- and policy-making. And all schools should be expected to welcome this kind of participation. If more parents were able

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School Choice Glossary

Charter Schools

These are schools run independently of the traditional public school system that receive public funding and are held accountable by an agreement (a charter) between either the state or local school system and the school. Teachers, parents, higher education groups or foundations often initiate charter schools. They are free of many district regulations and, as a result, are often tailored to meet specific community needs and experiment with different educational approaches.

Controlled-Choice

Programs where parents can choose to send their children to any school in a particular district as long as it does not upset the racial balance of those schools. Often designed as a remedy to pending desegregation suits.

Home Schooling

Traditionally motivated by religious doctrine, a growing number of parents are now choosing to educate their children at home due to dissatisfaction with their public schools. Home schooling is legal in all 50 states. Only 10 states require parents to have any specific teaching qualifications, while 29 states require students to have regular evaluations or take standardized tests. This lack of consistent oversight raises significant concerns about the quality of the education home-schooled children receive.

Magnet School

A public school that places special emphasis on a particular theme or subject (e.g., science, technology or the arts) or population (e.g., special education or recent immigrants), designed to attract students from throughout a school district. Historically, they have been designed as a strategy to encourage integration, and in some places, stem middle class flight to private schools.

School Choice

Any proposal that allows children to attend schools outside their community or local district boundaries. However, the term is sometimes used synonymously with voucher plans (see below).

Vouchers

A document or credit, usually issued by the state (and sometimes in the form of a private scholarship), which can be used by parents to pay tuition at an out-of-district public school, a private school, and/or a religious school. The term is also used more broadly to describe school choice proposals in which states would help pay tuition for children attending private or religious schools.

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Letter from the Executive Director

“Why Public School Action is a Better Choice than Vouchers.”

Parents for Public Schools’ support of public education—and its position opposing vouchers as a quick fix—is rooted in the *expectation* that a community has an obligation to provide every child a quality education. What distinguishes us from voucher and some other school choice proponents is that we believe public education should be a community enterprise, not a free enterprise. Unless school choice ideas like vouchers can guarantee every child a good school—which they do not—we must concentrate on fixing the schools we have.

PPS members are not naive about the condition of public schools. We, after all, are in them. Good schools (and there are many) fuel our optimism; bad schools fuel our persistence. We would argue that if excellence can be delivered in some places, it can be delivered in all places.

If it’s choice you’re after, public school parents **have** a choice. PPS urges all parents to choose action over apathy. We need to organize, apply pressure to the system, and fix the problems our schools have. Not just fix the schools for a few neglected in the inner city or a handful of attentive members of the middle class, but fix them for all kids and fix them for good.

That’s part of what we’re trying to accomplish with this and other issues of *Parent Press*, as well as in our work more generally. We’re providing a sense of the issues facing proactive parent advocates, as well as ideas, tools and questions to help local chapters develop effective strategies for action.

PPS challenges districts and communities alike to be accountable to all children. PPS chapters have taken on some of the toughest and most persistent problems their districts face—overcrowding, school safety, and teacher quality, to name just a few. PPS is a good example of citizen action for better public schools. As a unique band of consumers (really “owners”) of public schools, we’re a good and promising antidote for bad

schools—and a reminder that some school choice remedies, and especially vouchers, are not the best choice we have.



Kelly Allin Butler, PPS
Executive Director



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Charters: Both Sides of the Argument

In September 1992, the nation’s first charter school opened in St. Paul, MN. By June of 1998, 786 charter schools had been opened, 429 had already been approved to open and 34 were pending approval, according to the Center for Education Reform, a group that supports charters and monitors their activity nationwide. This mushrooming of publicly funded, but independently operated schools has stirred a national debate. Very little conclusive research has surfaced to clarify the advantages to student achievement or the actual effects innovative charters have on local public schools. Both sides have cohesive appeals and some preliminary research to back up their views. These arguments are outlined below:

What Proponents Say:

■ Charter schools are often centered on specific academic themes such as “back to basics,” Afrocentric principles, arts and drama—objectives parents believe their local schools are not equipped to teach successfully.

■ Schools are most effective when they are uninhibited by legislation and bureaucracy. Teachers and administrators in charters feel empowered by this freedom and are therefore more effective.

■ Charter school parents are more likely to participate in their children’s education because they were given the power to choose and are therefore more responsible for their children’s education.

■ Charter schools create healthy competition among schools that creates incentives for higher levels of performance.

■ Tax dollars should be spent on educating children in ways that parents/taxpayers believe will be most effective.

■ Charter schools are effective as educational laboratories, and their success should be used to spur educational advancement for public school systems.

“I’d like to see charter schools used to re-invigorate the public school movement. But today, there isn’t dialogue, there aren’t mechanisms to inform public school systems [about charter school innovations].”

—Amy Stuart Wells,
Professor of Education Policy
UCLA

What Opponents Say:

■ All students, not just some, should be given the best education possible. The best way to achieve that goal is to put all the best educational resources and energy into improving the existing public schools. Similarly, public money should be used for the largest public good, that is, improving the existing public school system.

■ Theme-based charter schools shift the balance in public schools. Charters based on arts and drama, for example, siphon off the artistic students from the school system and create a “drought” in other public schools.

■ Charter schools also siphon away active parents. Parents who choose to send their kids to charter schools are often highly involved in their children’s education. Removing parents that are effective advocates for student achievement creates an energy drain in the remaining public schools.

■ Charter schools seek to get away from rules imposed by a district’s bureaucracy, but that are designed to promote equity. Many federal and state regulations seek to ensure all children receive an equal education, particularly children of color and those with disabilities. These are goals we must not abandon.

TOOLBOX

Sizing Up Charters

Facing the prospect of charter schools in your community or state? Below is a set of suggested questions parents/PPS chapters should ask. Answering these questions can help frame and shape a chapter’s response to the proposed schools.

Context

- What are the circumstances that have led to consideration of a charter school?
- Can these circumstances be addressed only by forming a charter school?
- Have you tried to meet these needs *within* the current system? What was the result?
- Do the stakeholders who want to form the charter school include representatives from the broader school community (parents, teachers, district personnel, community representatives, even students)? If not, what efforts are planned to build bridges and bring others into the process?
- What is the focus of the charter? Is there a broad consensus about this?

Access

- As a publicly funded school or as a private school converting to public charter, will there be equal access for all children? What are the criteria and process for admission?
- Will accommodations be made for the special needs of children with disabilities?

Academics and school life

- Are the academic standards and expected levels of performance for students clearly articulated?
- Will children be exposed to the arts? Will they have access to physical education and varsity sports participation?
- What are the qualifications required for teachers?
- What are the expectations of parents?

Connection to the district

- What are the measures of educational and fiscal accountability?
- How much autonomy from the district will the charter have?
- How will the school be governed?
- If the school succeeds, is there a plan for disseminating best practices to the public school system?

Testing Vouchers' Impact

Milwaukee: Is it working?

The Milwaukee Parental Choice program, enacted by the Wisconsin State Legislature in the summer of 1990, provides vouchers worth \$4,400 each to 6,200 low-income families and allows children to attend private and religious schools in and around the city. This is approximately 6% of the more than 100,000 students currently in the Milwaukee Public Schools system. Not including administrative expenses for the program this year, this comes to a price tag in excess of \$26 million.

Are Vouchers Worth It?

Not surprisingly, policymakers and taxpayers are anxious to know if these substantial investments are paying off. In Wisconsin, an official, state-commissioned study, conducted by John F. Witte, education professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, determined that though parents in the program gave it high marks, students using vouchers to attend private schools did no better on tests than their public sector peers. These findings are consistent with much of the education literature during the past 30 years, which has found no achievement differences between public and private school students, once background characteristics are taken into consideration.

Voucher proponents and Paul E. Peterson, director of the program of Educational Policy and Governance at Harvard University, have challenged the state-commissioned test's methodology, saying its approach rendered the results inaccurate. Peterson conducted a similar study. But as a control group, he used students from public schools who had applied for the voucher program, but had not been selected in the lottery. Peterson's analysis came up with the opposite conclusion: students who attended private schools scored better than students who did not.

Voucher opponents, including the American Federation of Teachers, have in turn contested Peterson's study on a variety of accounts, particularly that it did not control for the educational background of the children's parents or a dramatic drop in the study's sample size during the three-year analysis.

Cleveland Just as Contested

This year, the Cleveland program set aside vouchers worth \$2,250 for 3,744 low-income students (out of a total of approximately 75,000 in the Cleveland Public Schools). This comes to a cost of more than \$6 million including administrative expenses. Both programs use a lottery system to determine who receives the vouchers.

Just as in Milwaukee, evaluations of the Cleveland voucher program are hotly debated, as well. A state-sponsored, Indiana University study published late last year, found voucher students performing slightly better in language skills and science, but no better in reading, math and social studies.

The study, however, was unequivocal about a group of new schools called Hope Academies that sprang up to take advantage of the vouchers. Students in these schools, sponsored by industrialist David Brennan, scored significantly lower than those students in both the public schools and in established private schools.

Paul Peterson, again using a different methodology, found measurable student achievement gains in the voucher program. In a recent *Education Week* story, Indiana University researchers, led by Kim Metcalf, Director of the Center for Evaluation at IU's School of Education, say they stand by their findings.

Districts Still Looking to Vouchers

Voucher supporters so far seem to have the public relations advantage. Using a "market" metaphor effectively, voucher proponents place public school reformers at a distinct disadvantage. Despite the lack of solid evidence, however, to support claims of success, several other states are nevertheless following Wisconsin and Ohio's example—passing and/or proposing legislation to create new voucher programs. In Texas, for example, Governor George W. Bush won an overwhelming re-election in a campaign in which one of his main political objectives included passing a pilot voucher program.

In New York, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani of New York City has proposed testing a Milwaukee-style voucher program, despite the objections of several educational leaders in the state and city. And in Florida, the legislature has approved a new state-wide voucher program to students currently enrolled in public schools which are deemed as failing on a formula based on scores on stated-mandated tests.

Responding to Public Challenges, a Good Strategy

Public school proponents fighting new (or established) voucher programs face an uphill battle. Being anti-voucher is not enough. Public school advocates must be willing to address real concerns about student achievement in public schools even as they point out the shortcomings of vouchers. These include the lack of achievement gains in voucher programs, the need for rigorous public oversight of public dollars, the economies of scale system-wide reform offers over vouchers, and the damage voucher programs can do to public schools' ability to build community cohesion and strength.

Importantly, we must aggressively challenge the status quo and offer constructive ideas that work. We must be willing to address real concerns about student achievement in public schools, even as they point out the shortcomings of vouchers. We must also alert the public to the subtext underneath the voucher rhetoric. If making schools good for all children is really the goal of vouchers, in what specific and immediate ways do vouchers strengthen schools? If creating equity is a goal of vouchers, why do only a few get them—and by lottery? If improving accountability is a goal of vouchers, what measures are in place to ensure quality at the schools where vouchers are honored? If kids need a voucher to go to a better school, transforming the one they are already in is the best place to start.



Choosing public:
PPS members at 1999 Leadership Conference in Charleston, SC — Joe Rackley (SC), Estus Smith (OH), Susan Foreman (NC), Carlesa Finney (MD).

Ear to the Ground

PPS Leaders Speak about School Choice

In a series of informal interviews with some PPS chapter leaders and friends, *Parent Press* found some in the network willing to consider school choice proposals on a case-by-case basis. Still, all those interviewed took issue with one underlying idea: Whatever successes they might have, magnets, charters and vouchers benefit only a small part of the school-age population. Reform efforts, they said, must go further to improve conditions for **all** children, not simply those whose parents knew how to get their hands on a voucher or those children able to test or find their way into a magnet.

A few of the PPS voices we heard...

Etta Green Johnson Independent Education Consultant, PPS board member

"What we need from our public school systems are a set of diverse schools, excellent schools. We need a choice of riches, not of deprivation."

Mary Esther Schnaubelt Executive Director, Jackson Chapter

On the "vouchers" offered to public students for private schools by the local Children's Scholarship Fund: "They only serve a handful of children. It's a great loss. It would be much more efficient to work to improve public schools instead of pulling out a handful of kids."

Myras Holmes President, Cleveland Chapter, PPS board member

"All public schools need to serve all kids. They should center on the needs of all kids. There needs to be equity."

Dick Boyd University of Mississippi, PPS board member

"Many of the advantages that charters offer can be instituted in public systems. Magnet schools can and do offer specialized curriculum. And in any system, districts can place responsibility for decision-making at the site level with principals and teachers and parents."

Charlie Olson Waco, TX school board member, PPS board member

"We have three charter schools in Waco. In recent years, we have worked with our superintendent to set high academic standards. And we now require students to score 70 or above on the statewide Texas Assessment of Academic Skills in order to be promoted to the next grade. From what we can tell, many of the people enrolling their children in charters are actually leaving the public schools to avoid Waco's academic standards."

PPS's Position Statement — Vouchers

Though Parents for Public Schools does not take a formal stand on many issues, its official position on vouchers is clear:

"Parents for Public Schools values public education as a community enterprise. PPS chapters organize to recruit families to public schools, to promote and focus positive attention on the public schools, and to work for improvements within the public schools. PPS strives to maximize parent involvement and consolidate community resources by working together to ensure quality and equitable education for all children.

"In keeping with our mission, PPS unequivocally opposes vouchers, tuition tax credits or voucher programs which divert public resources from the public schools or divide the potential constituency for public schools. Parents for Public Schools values the rights and responsibilities of parents to be decision-makers in the public schools and favors choice within the public school system. We believe the issues of choice should be decided at the local level."

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to exercise this “choice,” public schools would improve for all students and school choice options would be about program preferences, not program quality.

The Ambiguous Promise of Charters

Publicly financed, state or locally sanctioned charter schools (see Glossary) also provide a mixture of opportunities and challenges (For a more complete discussion, see “Charters: Both Sides of the Argument,” page 2.). In districts slow to change, well-crafted, accountable charters offer the autonomy to take risks, serve as innovative educational models, and create strong learning environments that improve student achievement.

Charter schools also provide a significant range of parent involvement opportunities. In the best cases, parents play a role in the formation of the school, serve on the governance board, volunteer on a regular basis, and participate actively in all aspects of school life. Some charter schools go so far as to mandate parent participation as a condition of enrollment.

Charters also pose several concerns, as well. Autonomy provides freedom, but states and districts’ willingness to hold charter schools accountable varies widely. The relative fiscal and managerial inexperience of some charter schools’ sponsors can also limit these schools’ ability to deliver better student achievement. The attention and public resources that are focused on the relatively few children who are in charter schools may distract districts from finding solutions that help all children. And some see charter schools as a solution designed to accommodate and serve middle class families, rather than all public school families.

“I’d like to see charter schools used to re-invigorate the public school movement,” says Amy Stuart Wells, Professor of Education Policy at UCLA. “But today, there isn’t dialogue, there aren’t mechanisms to inform public school systems [about charter school innovations].” Wells also suggests that charter school reform needs to focus more explicitly on ensuring equity, particularly across urban school districts.

The Danger of Vouchers

Even more controversial than charters, vouchers place public funds in parents’ hands and let them use the money to send their children to private schools. Supporters argue that only vouchers can create a true free market for parents’ education dollars and thereby develop the economic pressure necessary to promote good schools and close bad ones.

“Our position is that we’re for kids,” says Stewart Springfield, Executive Director of the Walton Family Foundation, which supports a variety of public education reform approaches, including vouchers. “Our belief is that no institution will change from

School Choices: How Do They Measure Up?

Option	Parents’ Choice	Good for Individual Student	Good for All Students
Proactive Parent Involvement in Existing Schools	Get involved in the governance and decision-making process and work for the benefit of all children.	Yes	Yes
Public School Choice (Magnet Schools, Controlled Choice programs)	Choose the best school available for your child within the current public system.	Yes	Yes, if the program serves to balance resources throughout the district. No, if choice creates hierarchy of good schools and bad.
Charters	Place your child in a new (and hopefully innovative) program unrestricted by many district and union regulations.	Probably	Not unless innovations are shared.
Vouchers	Use the share of the tax dollars set aside for your child’s education (or a private scholarship) to pay for part of the tuition at a private or religious school.	Unclear (early research is contested)	No (especially not in the short term)
Home Schooling	Opt out of organized schooling and educate your child yourself.	Unclear	No

internal pressure. With vouchers, we believe good change will come from the external pressure of the market.” Springfield and other voucher proponents also point out that low-income parents whose children are stuck in chronically low-performing schools should have additional options, just as more affluent parents do.

Others disagree. “Parents hold the power to make change,” notes Rhonda Boozer, National

Coordinator of Educational Outreach at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). “But parents, and particularly African American and minority parents don’t often realize their power. If parents want change, they need to make their voices heard in the public school system.” As PPS chapters have proven across the country, well-organized parents can provide the “external” pressure some school districts may need to improve.

Opponents of vouchers, including PPS, also say that vouchers siphon needed funds away from cash-strapped public school districts and, like magnets and charters, draw the most motivated students and parents from schools that need these people the most. Additionally, because many private schools are run by religious organizations, constitutional issues around the separation of church and state arise. While the Supreme Court has traditionally forbidden public

funds supporting religious schools, the high Court recently refused to hear a case challenging the constitutionality of Milwaukee’s voucher program, allowing a lower court decision in favor of the program to stand.

“We at PPS have a fundamental concern with vouchers,” says Butler. “It is simply that vouchers offer an unproven and insufficient remedy for a few children above the long-term needs of all children.”

A Balanced Approach to Choice

The issues surrounding school choice are not simple. Activists must make sense of local realities and local proposals. Some school choice plans are presented as good faith reform ideas. Others are foisted as a means to break down public school systems and promote privatization. As “owners” of public schools, parents are urged to consider the following, not only when school choice plans are on the table, but when analyzing public school policies in general:

What are the choices or options currently available in the system for parents to participate in the improvement of public schools?

Do parents have a fair and open chance to participate in the policy debate around school choice ideas?

Will there be a governance or oversight role for parents in the proposed policy?

Will the policy ensure open and fair admissions for all students?

Will the policy result in a fair distribution of financial and human resources for all students?

How will the district ensure that schools involved are accountable to the public?

How will the district ensure that the innovations or positive learnings derived from this experiment help to improve the system as a whole?

For more information

contact the PPS Clearinghouse at 800/880-1222 or refer to our website at parents4publicschools.com